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By Dan Taylor

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The House Appropriations defense subcommittee wants to allow the Navy to buy a fourth Littoral Combat Ship and nine more F/A-18 Super Hornets in fiscal year 2010, according to its mark of the defense budget.

The subcommittee's version of the defense appropriations bill calls for $15 billion to buy 10 ships, two more than the Navy requested. The mark-up adds money for a second Intra-Theater Connector Ship and a fourth Littoral Combat Ship.

“If you're going to look short-term, what's going on now, [the LCS is] probably the most important program we have,” Rep. John Murtha (D-PA), subcommittee chairman, told reporters after the mark-up. “I talked to the secretary of the Navy about this . . . and I told him what we were doing, and he was delighted that this was happening. So I'd like to see them even build more.”

The panel's proposal also includes an extra $495 million to double the buy of F/A-18E/F Super Hornets to bring the total to 18 aircraft. In

the FY-09 budget request, the Navy had planned to buy 18 Super Hornets in FY-10 but revised that down to nine this year. The move prompted complaints from lawmakers who cite a projected strike fighter gap in the late 2010s expected to peak at 243 aircraft.

The Navy has argued that it will determine the way forward in the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review, and that nine Super Hornets and 22 EA-18G Growler electronic attack variants are more than enough to keep production lines humming.

Murtha, however, said he was concerned about the strike fighter gap and expressed frustration that the Pentagon has not presented him with a plan yet on how to deal with it.

“I keep worrying that if we don't upgrade the old aircraft -- we got a shortfall, as you know, down the road with F-18s, so we added as many as we thought we could with the amount of money we had available,” he said.

The Navy requested only $85 million in research and development funds for the VH-71 presidential helicopter program, which the Pentagon has opted to end due to cost overruns. However, the subcommittee added $400 million to the request to “operationalize five aircraft,” according to a summary of the changes released by Murtha's office.

“When they spend $3.2 billion [on VH-71], we've got to get something out of that,” Murtha said.

“We've got five helicopters and maybe four more that could be utilized, and I'm saying to them . . . 'Let's find a way to utilize some of this.' I've complained now for the last two years, at least, saying, 'You just can't cancel programs and not get anything out of them.'”

The mark-up adds $142 million to the E-2D Advanced Hawkeye surveillance aircraft program to buy a third aircraft. The Navy asked for only two E-2Ds after planning to buy three following a cut to advanced procurement funding last year, but a member of the subcommittee's staff said the sea

service would be able to work around that issue.

Murtha said the panel decided to cut funding for the Joint
Strike Fighter, particularly the Marine Corps' F-35B short-take-off,
vertical-landing (STOVL) variant, by $532 million because the program would not
be able to spend the money in FY-10. The mark-up funds $5.6 billion for the
procurement of 28 F-35s -- 14 STOVL, four carrier and 10 Air Force variants.
The Navy requested an extra two STOVLs to bring the total to 16 aircraft.

The panel once again ignored the Pentagon's request to zero
out funding for the alternative F136 JSF engine program, adding $560 million to
the bill to fund it.

The mark-up fully funds a number of other programs,
including $539 million to go toward the third DDG-1000 destroyer; $2.6 billion
to buy 30 MV-22 and five CV-22 Osprey aircraft; and $1.6 billion to buy 22
EA-18G Growlers.